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# Multimodality, Translingualism, and Rhetorical Genre Studies

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Laura Gonzales

**Abstract:** This article situates one possible future for rhetorical genre studies (RGS) in the translingual, multimodal composing practices of linguistically diverse composition students. Using focus group data collected with L1 (English as a first language) and L2 (English as a second language) students at two large public state universities, the researcher examines connections between students' linguistic repertoires and their respective approaches to multimodal composition. Students at both universities took composition courses that incorporate rhetorical genre studies approaches to teaching writing in conventional print and multimodal forms. Findings suggest L2 students exhibit advanced expertise and rhetorical sensitivity when layering meaning through multimodal composition. This expertise comes in part from L2 students' experiences combining and crossing various modes when they cannot exclusively rely on words to communicate in English. Through this evidence, the researcher argues the translingual practices of L2 students can bridge connections and help develop pedagogical applications of multimodality and RGS, primarily by helping writing instructors teach genres as fluid and socially situated. In addition, the researcher presents a methodology for analyzing the embodied practices of composition students, which can further expand how genres are theorized and taught in composition courses.

In their presentation at the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication, "Rethinking Difference in Composing Composition: Language, Translation, Genre, Modality," Min-Zhan Lu, Anis Bawarshi, Nancy Bou Ayash, Juan Guerra, Bruce Horner, and Cynthia Selfe situated the future of writing instruction in translingual, multimodal practices and pedagogies. Bringing together key scholars in translingualism, multimodal composition, and North American Rhetorical Genre Studies (RGS), this panel highlighted the importance of pushing beyond what Selfe described as the "single language/single modality perspective" in writing instruction.<sup>{1}</sup> [\[#note1\]](#)

The emergence of multimodality and translingualism, and the connections between these concepts, Selfe and Horner explain, reflect "the development and increasingly global reach and use of new communication technologies and networks" as well as "the increasing and increasingly undeniable, traffic among peoples and languages" (4). Rhetorical Genre Studies, by "direct[ing] our attention to the sociality of discourse," highlights the movement between languages and modes outlined in translingual and multimodal scholarship (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2). By putting multimodal and translingual composition in conversation, this paper situates one possible future for RGS in the multimodal, translingual composing practices of contemporary composition students.

## Rhetorical Genre Studies and Multimodality

Rhetorical Genre Studies, developed in part through Carolyn Miller's seminal work highlighted in this special issue of *Composition Forum*, expands previous conceptions of genre to "fuse text and context, product and process, cognition and culture in a single, dynamic concept" (Paré 57). As such, RGS "encourages us [and potentially our students] to consider the complex interconnections" between "the full social and symbolic action of textual practice" (Paré 57). Rather than focusing on restricted types of genres (e.g., "argument" or "persuasive" essays) with bounded (monolingual/monomodal) rules and conventions, RGS illustrates "one of the stronger and most promising developments for comprehending the sociality of discourse while allowing discursive freedom and agency to individuals" (Coe, Lingard, and Teslenko 2).

Building on the discursive freedom and situated practice promoted by RGS, some North American RGS scholars interested in multimodality are encouraging composition instructors to use RGS as a way to help students conceptualize genres in less bounded, more socially-situated ways (Arola, Ball and Sheppard 2014; Hawisher et al. 2013; Selfe and Horner 2013; Shipka 2011). For example, Arola, Sheppard, and Ball's recent *Writer/Designer: A Guide to Making Multimodal Projects*, is explicitly grounded in Rhetorical Genre Studies, using RGS to help

students select the appropriate modes to rhetorically compose arguments through multimodal projects. This approach, the authors explain, is founded on an understanding “that texts and genres constantly shift in form, content, and meaning based on historical, social, cultural and other ideological contexts” (3). Similarly, Jodi Shipka emphasizes the imperative for writing instructors to teach multimodal genres rhetorically in order to help students continue functioning as “rhetorically sensitive individuals” who “understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways” geared to various audiences (Shipka, “Including” 78).

Together, these scholars argue that multimodal pedagogies grounded in RGS “provide students with a much broader toolkit from which to function as rhetors in the world,” helping them reconceive genres not as static forms that only exist in educational settings, but as socially situated heuristics developed to meet the needs of particular communities at specific times (Arola, Ball, Sheppard 2013). The aim of both RGS and multimodal composition is to understand writing in context and to leverage their rhetorical impact when communicating with various audiences. The goal of multimodal composition curricula using RGS as a framework, in turn, is to help students understand writing as socially situated rather than as a static, rule-bound phenomenon.

## Translingualism: A Bridge across Languages, Genres, and Modes

Similar to the less-bounded conceptions of genres promoted by multimodality, proponents of translingualism suggest “communication always involves a negotiation of mobile codes,” including languages, media, gestures, and other semiotic resources (Canagarajah, “Translingual” 8). The translingual turn in composition seeks to highlight “practice-based, adaptive, emergent, multimodal, multisensory, multilateral, and therefore multidimensional” aspects of writing, further situating genres within social contexts (Canagarajah, “Lingua” 924). According to Lu and Horner, translingualism treats semiotic modes and cultural/linguistic histories “as always emergent, in process (a state of becoming), and their relations as mutually constitutive,” rather than “treating these as discrete, preexisting, stable, and enumerable entities” (587). Thus, translingualism offers a way to connect the socially situated conceptions of genres promoted by RGS with the flexible, audience-centered approach to teaching writing adopted by multimodal scholars.

The “translingual approach” to writing and writing pedagogy described by Horner, Lu, Royster, and Trimbur addresses “how language norms are actually heterogeneous, fluid, and negotiable,” hence “directly counter[ing] demands that writers must conform to fixed, uniform standards” (305). By unbinding genres from static forms and encouraging movement across languages and modes, translingualism has “attracted the attention of scholars and teachers in writing studies at all levels,” while simultaneously resulting in many adaptations that “fail to define the concept or use it consistently” (Matsuda 479). For this reason, any study that claims to use translingualism as a framework must provide a particular definition to be used in context of the data presented.

For the purposes of this paper, I will be using translingualism as a framework to analyze the fluidity and negotiation of language in various modes. That is, translingualism (as it is used in this paper) provides a lens by which to examine (and value) “how writers deploy [and combine] diction, syntax, and style, as well as form, register, and media” (Horner, Lu, Royster, “Language” 304). Translingualism, as I will be using the term, does not define or represent students’ linguistic backgrounds.<sup>{2}</sup> [\[#note2\]](#) Rather, translingualism gives us a framework for understanding the fluidity of modalities and languages, a framework that we can use (as I intend to do in this study) to further understand how our students draw on their linguistic experiences to make meaning through their composing practices.

The study presented in this paper provides one illustration of how RGS, with its multimodal and translingual implications, is already being enacted by contemporary composition students who are continuously “shuttling” between languages and modes to make meaning, leveraging rhetorical resources to meet communicative needs in increasingly diverse contexts (Canagarajah “Translingual”). By presenting data from a study that explores linguistically diverse composition students’ perceptions of multimodal genres, I will suggest that one possible future for RGS lies in the multimodal, translingual connections already being made in our classrooms by students who, to varying degrees “regularly confront the challenge of working across languages” (Lu and Horner 585). In the sections that follow, I will present an anecdote to illustrate how students leverage rhetorical resources to cross linguistic and modal boundaries. I will then elaborate on the connections between multimodality, translingualism, and RGS to further foreground how students, and in particular students who have faced and continue to face broad linguistic transitions, can help RGS continue pushing composition scholarship beyond a “single language/single mode” model.

## Enacting Multimodality, Translingualism, and RGS: Nathalia's Story

Recently, in my first-year composition (FYC) class, I assigned a short reading response that asked students to respond to the following prompt: "Drawing on Deborah Brandt's definition of literacy sponsors, please identify some of Malcolm X's literacy sponsors." As my students came up to the front of the room at the end of class to submit their responses, one student, Nathalia, looking mortified, claimed, "I did this wrong. Can I please turn this in tomorrow?" as she handed me the drawing depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Nathalia's Reading Response.

When asked to "draw on" something to explain something else, Nathalia literally drew her responses. Most students provided a written, conventional print response that reflected their understanding of Brandt's concept to describe how Malcolm X learned to read through his various interactions with the people, places, and things that sponsored his literacy. However, Nathalia accurately, albeit unconventionally, explicitly drew some of Malcolm X's literacy sponsors as they are described in "Learning to Read," a chapter from his autobiography that I assigned in class.

In my assignment prompt, I used the phrase "draw on" with the assumption that students would perceive I was asking them to write about Malcolm X using Brandt's framework. In some ways, my assignment prompt was situated in a single language/single mode ideology, as I assumed all students would interpret the word "drawing" through an English-based, academic lens, and that these students would then respond to my prompt through a conventional print mode. Though the rest of my students did so, Nathalia interpreted my directions differently. In her reading response, she illustrates (quite literally) that time, Bimbi, the dictionary, and jail served as Malcolm X's literacy sponsors, which she understood as "agents...who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy" (Brandt 166). Through his interactions with these sponsors, Nathalia illustrates, Malcolm X developed different literacies, including reading and writing.

Though not immediately evident, I realized Nathalia's reading response was not an anomalous error, but rather a reflection of her ability to utilize a variety of semiotic resources when attempting to communicate her ideas. Several months after she turned in this drawing, Nathalia told me she learned to speak English as a second language, one she learned after moving to the US from Colombia, where she spoke Spanish. By combining her interpretation of the word "drawing" with illustrations and words describing Malcolm X's literacy sponsors, Nathalia's reading response was an act of translanguaging, as she "adopt[ed] interpretative strategies," to combine words and visuals in her multimodal reading response (Canagarajah "Translingual" 4). Rather than beginning with a conventional understanding of the "reading response" genre (one that I may not have clearly described to my students), Nathalia began to develop her response by thinking beyond conventional print, monomodal genres. Cued by her interpretation of the word "draw," Nathalia conceptualized ways to present her answer through pictures, combining colors, words, and images. She didn't have a template or pre-established generic idea for what this drawing was supposed to look like, but she knew the ideas she wanted to convey and managed to illustrate these ideas through her pictures. It wasn't until Nathalia saw other reading responses that she became alarmed by the genre conventions assumed by her

peers (and by me as her instructor).

Though this story represents a single example of a translingual/transmodal writing act performed by an L2 writer, experiences like Nathalia's prompted me to continue paying attention to the ways students who have crossed broad linguistic boundaries display rhetorical dexterity when conveying their ideas through multimodal projects. This rhetorical dexterity, I argue, can be directly related to students' experiences moving between semiotic resources to convey their thoughts. As Lachman Mulchand Khubchandani suggests, when L2 writers "cannot rely on a shared language or grammatical norms, they align participants, contexts, objects, and diverse multimodal semiotic cues to generate meaning" (31). The process of generating cues to develop meaning is not unique to L2 students (Lu and Horner 2013). However, as my study will further demonstrate, students who have a history of broad linguistic transitions may be especially adept at generating cues across languages and modes based on their extensive experiences code-switching (both linguistically, culturally, and often times transnational) in order to adapt to "the whole new system" of writing in English-dominant American classrooms (Seloni 48). For this reason, my study suggests that as composition studies moves beyond a single language/ single modality approach to writing by combining RGS, multimodality, and translingualism, we might learn from the experiences and strategies of L2 students who are already crossing and combining languages and modes to convey meaning in their daily communication.

## Method and Rationale

As a preliminary exploration of how linguistically diverse L2 students interact with multimodality and translingualism, two focus groups lasting 1.5 hours each were conducted to understand how students' approaches to and conceptions of writing shift when composing print and multimodal genres.<sup>{4}</sup> [\[#note4\]](#) Focus groups were used as a method to encourage dialogue between participants sharing specific characteristics, including languages and linguistic backgrounds (Krueger and Casey). Exchanges between participants and me as the focus group facilitator were analyzed to account for the ways tacit assumptions about writing emerged through conversation. By conducting focus groups, I could trace not only how individual students discussed their writing practices, but also how students conversed about these practices as they recalled their experiences in similar composition courses.

Composition curricula at both institutions asked students to compose both conventional print and multimodal genres in the same semester. Students at both universities were asked to write a literacy narrative and rhetorical analysis assignment in a conventional print form, and were then asked to "remix" either the literacy narrative or rhetorical analysis through a multimodal genre. Composition curricula at both universities incorporated rhetorical genre studies approaches to teaching writing by encouraging and requiring that students identify, analyze, and compose a variety of genres appropriate to different rhetorical contexts. For example, the "remix project" assignment sheet used at one university asked students to "design a project that illustrates your awareness of the rhetorical choices you make." The purpose of the remix assignment as described in this same assignment sheet explains that students should be able to "demonstrate the ability to locate, critically evaluate, and employ a variety of sources for a range of purposes" by adapting their previous assignment through the use of various media. In the course objectives for composition curricula at both universities, instructors explain they want their students to develop and demonstrate an understanding that writing is socially and culturally situated. In this way, composition curricula at both universities draw influences from RGS by teaching writing as rhetorically and contextually bound.

Students from various linguistic backgrounds were recruited for these focus groups in order to understand if and how students' linguistic backgrounds influence their approaches to multimodal composing. Ten self-identified L2 writers and seven self-identified L1 writers at two large state universities who created multimodal projects in composition courses were recruited. While students were not separated into L1/L2 focus groups, they were asked to identify their linguistic backgrounds when agreeing to participate in the study. Asking students to describe their linguistic backgrounds allowed me to draw potential connections between students' linguistic repertoires and their approaches to multimodality.

Since all students took composition in English at universities in the US, learning more about my participants' linguistic and cultural transitions helped me better understand the extent to which they "regularly confront the challenge of working across languages" (Lu and Horner 585). In this way, I was able to explore how linguistic transitions, and the extent to which students navigate these transitions in their daily communication, may impact students' use of rhetorical resources in their writing classrooms. Including and highlighting L2 students in a broader

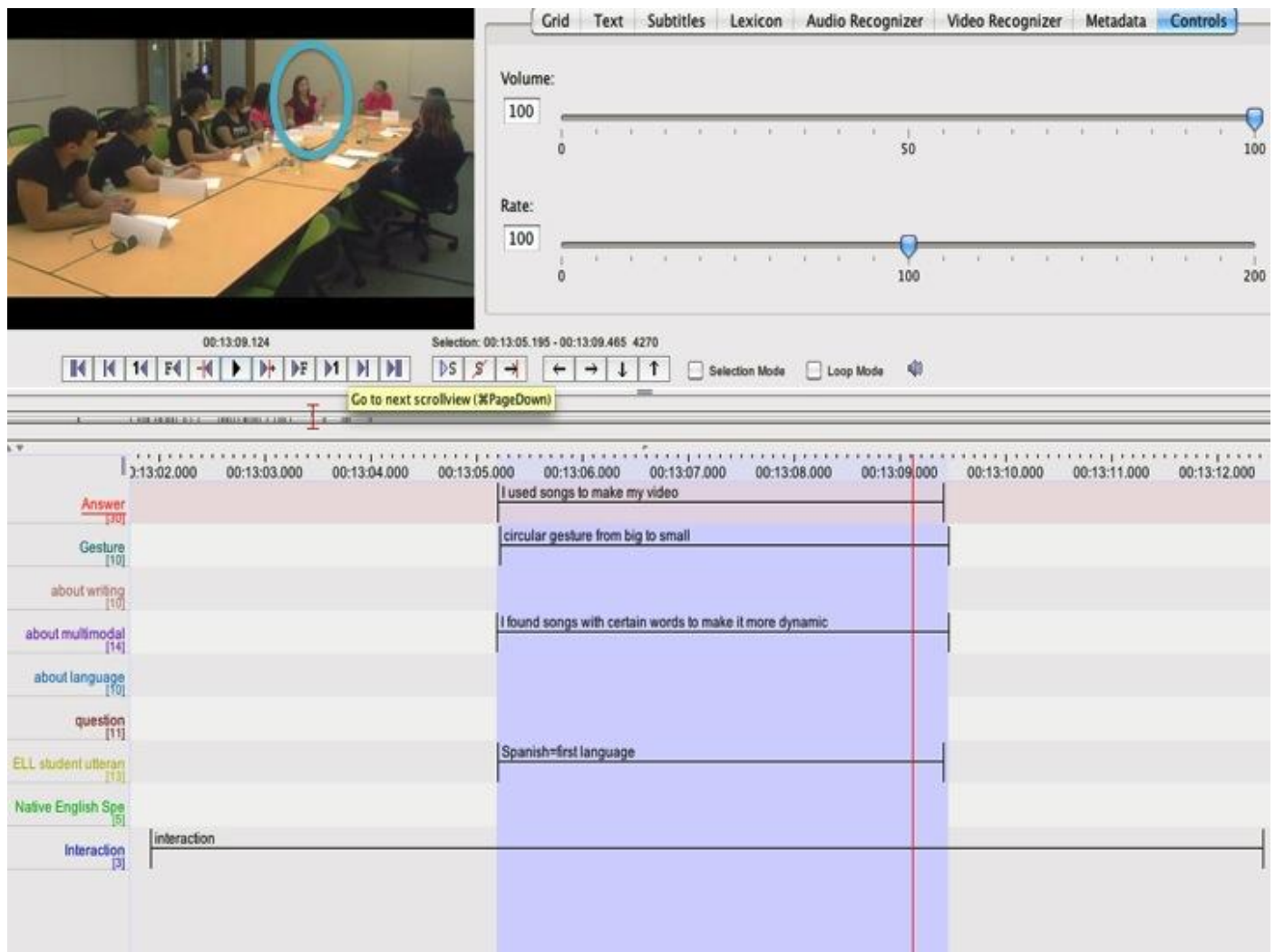
discussion of RGS illustrates not only how L2s (who are already present in most of our composition programs) reflect the struggles of the first-year composition student body in general, but also how the L2 population can help the field understand composing processes (and challenges) more broadly.

Footage was analyzed and coded using ELAN video coding software (<http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/> [<http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/>]). Since most research about composition students is focused on what instructors say about students' writing practices or what the students say about their own writing practices, using video to capture the embodied and visual discussion taking place during the focus groups provides an additional layer of understanding (Hawisher, Selfe, Berry and Skjulstad 2012). As Hawisher, Selfe, Berry and Skjulstad explain in their justification for using video data to both collect and present narratives and interviews in *Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times*, videos “add additional semiotic information and more to alphabetic representations of research.” In order to adequately represent the “additional semiotic information” provided through the video analysis and coding of the focus groups conducted for this study, I will first expand on the software and methodology used to code focus group footage for this study before elaborating on the analytical tools afforded through this method of analysis.

## Background on ELAN Coding Software:

ELAN, developed by the Max-Planck-Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI), is a transcription and coding tool intended to help researchers both transcribe video and audio data. As described by Brugman and Russell in their analysis of ELAN presented at the 2004 International Conference on Language Resources and Language Evaluation, the benefit of coding software like ELAN is that it allows coders to transcribe and then “add more and more analytic layers” through an iterative process (n. pag.). These layers, or “tiers,” can be applied simultaneously to a specific section of video data, thus forming “complex referential structures” to code “speech and gesture modalities” simultaneously (Brugman and Russell n. pag.). For the purposes of this study, using ELAN's tiers allowed me to code both students' verbal and embodied responses to my questions about their experiences with conventional print and multimodal genres. This was particularly crucial for a study including students from various linguistic backgrounds, as these students used gestures to clarify ideas that may not have been communicated clearly through spoken English alone.

For example, Figure 2 is a screenshot of the coding sequence for one L2 student's response. In the previous scene, the focus group moderator asked, “Can you tell me what you did to create your multimodal project in your composition class?” The student responded by explaining that she made a video, where she used songs to make the video “more dynamic.” As she said “more dynamic,” the student used her hands to make circular gestures that ranged in size from larger to smaller. She then continued by explaining that the songs she selected for her video allowed her to “zoom into” specific points she wanted to make in her video. The circular gestures in this case illustrated this student's movement from broader to smaller, more focused ideas as she “zoomed into” specific points through her video project.



**Figure 2.** Tiered Coding Example.

As seen in Figure 2, ELAN's tiers allowed me to code this student's response as a verbal "answer" to the focus group facilitator's question, an embodied answer to the question as represented through the student's circular gestures, and a comment about multimodal composition. Additionally, ELAN's tiers allowed me to note this student identified her first language as Spanish. The question posed by the focus group facilitator, in addition to the students' verbal and embodied answers, represent a single "interaction," which is also accounted for in the tiers represented in Figure 2. Through this example, it becomes clear how ELAN's tiered system allowed for a rich contextualization of students' responses. This contextualization became increasingly important as students continued discussing their engagement with multimodal composition. To fully research how students enact RGS in their composing practices, and to account for how students translanguage through both their verbal and embodied responses, I needed to use a method of analysis that allowed me to code not only what students were saying in response to my questions, but also how they were responding through their words and gestures. In the following section, I will elaborate on the tiered categories used to code video data from both focus groups.

## Coding Strategies

Using ELAN's tiered coding scheme, I coded all "exchanges" (Blythe 2012) between myself (the focus group facilitator) and focus group participants during the 230 minutes of video footage. I also coded exchanges among focus group participants. I used macro-level codes (e.g., questions, answers, exchanges) to first code all interactions, and then adopted axial coding strategies to create micro-level codes to further illustrate interactions (Saldaña). For example, I first watched the footage and noted each time the focus group facilitator or the participants asked a question and each time the facilitator or the participants provided an answer. These broader categories represent the macro-level codes used in the first round of coding. After coding macro-level categories, I watched the footage again to develop micro-level codes *in vivo*, as I watched the interactions between focus group participants and the

facilitator. I then watched all the footage a third time to specifically code for the micro-level categories developed during a previous viewing. These micro-level categories included comments about multimodal projects, comments about conventional print papers, embodied gestures, and comments made about learning and navigating new languages.

The tiered coding scheme also allowed me to note when comments were made by L1 writers or L2 writers. As they discussed their experiences with writing, many participants shared stories regarding their experiences learning a new language, so this last category developed through grounded methodology (Oktay) as I coded the videos during the second viewing. Another affordance of the coding software was that rather than transcribing the entire focus group and then figuring out what was important, I could transcribe as I coded, focusing on transcribing the micro-level codes that are included in the results and discussion sections.

Table 1 provides sample codes for both macro and micro level codes. One utterance or comment could have up to three tiers of codes. Macro-level codes refer to questions and answers exchanged between the focus group facilitator and participants, and micro-level codes reference student projects or language identifications (L1 or L2 writer).

**Table 1.** Coding Tiers and Examples.

Example/Utterance	Tier 1 Code(s)	Tier 2 Code(s)	Tier 3 Code(s)
“Do any of you speak a language other than English?”	Question, Exchange	statement about language learning/process	N/A
“Can you tell me about your process making your video or website? How did you put your ideas together?”	Question, Exchange	statement about multimodal project/writing	N/A
“When I write papers I have a lot of ideas, but I can’t get them on paper”	Answer, Exchange	statement about conventional print writing	Statement from L1 writer
“When I write papers I worry about putting things in the right order”	Answer, Exchange	statement about conventional print writing	Statement from L2 writer
“In Thailand we don’t use the same order of words like in English, so when I learned English I had to change the order of my words”	Answer, Exchange	statement about language learning/process	Statement from L2 writer
“I was born in China and learned to speak English when I was 18”	Answer, Exchange	statement about language learning/process	Statement from L2 writer
wave motions used when describing multimodal project	Answer, Exchange	embodied gesture, statement about multimodal project/writing	Statement from L2 writer

As evidenced in Table 1, micro-level codes are nonexclusive subcategories situated within the broader question, answer, and exchange macro-level codes. While this type of tiered coding allowed me to account for most utterances represented in the exchanges during the focus group, some utterances did not easily fall into the selected micro-level codes. For example, in one response, a student commented that “a video is more flexible than a paper.” In this case, the student was making a statement both about multimodal and conventional print genres. For this reason, I coded this instance as both “statement about conventional print writing” and “statement about multimodal project/writing.” In this way, the quantitative results of the analysis adequately reflect this particular statement. Additionally, though I coded for the linguistic background of the speaker making each utterance during the focus group (“Statement from L2 writer”/“Statement from L1 writer”), I removed these codes from the quantitative analysis when they were referencing the focus group facilitator.

After coding all exchanges between the facilitator and focus group participants, I used ELAN to count all instances of each code, calculating both numerical frequency and percentage of coverage for each category. The quantitative results are presented below in Table 2, followed by a discussion of relevant patterns and examples.

**Table 2.** Code Frequencies and Percentages

Code	Numeric Frequency	Percentage of Coverage
embodied response	43	6.5
Statement about conventional print genres/writing	79	12.0
Statement about multimodal project/writing	83	12.6
Statement about language learning/process	41	6.2
Statement from L2 writer	77	11.7
Statement from L1 writer	70	10.6
Question	65	9.9
Answer	147	22.4
Exchange	58	8.8
Totals	656	100.7

As evidenced in Table 2, L2 and L1 students had similar participation in the focus group discussions, accounting for

11.7% and 10.6% of coded utterances respectively. Additionally, the total percent coverage represented by all coded utterances extends slightly beyond 100% to 100.7%. This increase accounts for utterances that represented boundary codes, such as the statement that referenced both multimodality and conventional print writing described in the discussion above.

## Results and Discussion

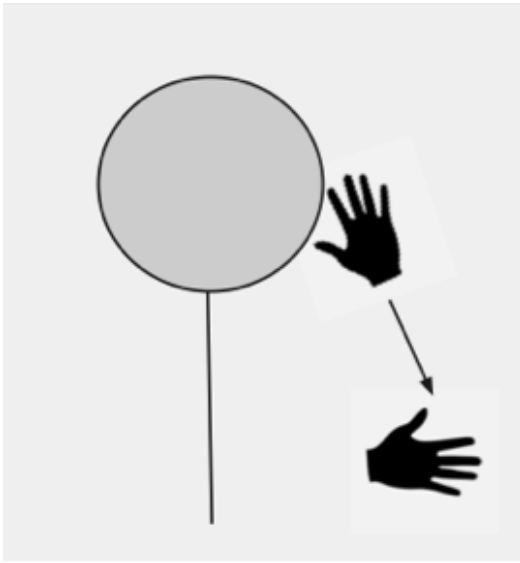
The 17 students in attendance during the focus groups had 8 different first languages: English, Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, Thai, Italian, and Hindi. There were a total of 656 coded strands, consisting of 58 exchanges (macro-level codes) made up of 65 questions and 147 answers between the focus group facilitator and focus group participants. There were also a total of 43 embodied responses coded during the discussion.

Although L1 and L2 students had similar concerns about composing conventional print texts, L2 writers discussed their multimodal composing practices differently than L1 writers. In the sections below, I will provide examples of how L1 and L2 writers represented at the focus groups described similar anxieties about writing conventional print genres. I will then move on to illustrate the differences between L1 and L2 students' multimodal composing practices before drawing further implications for researching multimodality and RGS through a translingual perspective.

### Students' Anxieties About Print Genres: "I just can't get my thoughts on paper"

When asked to describe their approaches and potential anxieties about composing conventional print genres such as the print version of their literacy narratives or rhetorical analyses, 12 of 17 students expressed similar concerns, stating that they had trouble translating their ideas into writing (the other 5 students gave less specific answers like "I've always hated writing" or "I don't know why I don't like writing"). Tiffany<sup>{5}</sup> [note5], an L1 focus group participant from Ann Arbor, Michigan, explained, "I always know what I wanna say in my paper, but for some reason I just can't get my thoughts on paper." Similarly, Ramon, a student from Cuba who learned to speak English at the age of 8, explained, "What I struggle with always is transferring my ideas from my thoughts to the paper. Like, I know what I wanna say and what I wanna get across, but I can't get my thoughts on paper." None of the students seemed concerned with their ability to generate ideas for things to write, as they clearly knew what they wanted to say, but 12 of 17 students mentioned having at least some difficulty taking these thoughts from their heads to their papers.

While transferring thoughts from their minds to paper(s) is a common concern for both L1 and L2 students, the embodied gestures exhibited by 12 L1 and L2 students during this discussion provide additional insights into potential reasons for this particular concern with conventional print writing. As students moved from pointing to their heads where their thoughts and ideas are stored, to the table, where they presumably perceived the papers to be written, they made direct, linear gestures with their hands (see Figure 3). They tapped their heads several times to explain they knew what they wanted to say (see Figure 4), and then made direct lines from their heads to the paper, demonstrating no room for flexibility or fluidity in the process. Students' perceptions of conventional print writing and their discussion of the perceived need to "transfer" thoughts to paper signal a common (and problematic) construct about the one-directional movement students perceive to take place as they transform thoughts into writing. More specifically, 12 L1 and L2 students described a unidirectional move going from their heads to their papers (and not back to their heads) as they wrote conventional print genres. Their hands remained straight and flat throughout these gestures, signaling a bounded perception of what it means to write conventional print, mode-restricted genres.



**Figure 3.** Students' Linear Perception of Print Genres.



**Figure 4.** Ramon and Tiffany Tap Their Heads to Signal Their Ideas.

Students' gestures, in conjunction with their verbal discussions, suggest a limited, linear perception of conventional print genres. As Tiffany continues discussing her experiences with conventional print writing, she references her previous writing courses, explaining:

When I was taught to write it was like these are the types of assignments you have...like a memoir or a research paper. And it was like you write it like *this* and it's *this* way. And this is the type of assignment that it is so do it.

The trouble, then, according to Tiffany, comes when students attempt to represent their ideas through conventional print genres, those that, as Tiffany suggests, are perceived by students as written *this* one way. Tiffany recalls memoirs and research papers as “ways of classifying” the writing she was asked to do in college (Devitt, Bawarshi, and Reiff 550). Writing conventional print genres in college, Tiffany explains, requires an adherence to prescribed forms and guidelines, signaling the “genre effect” that takes place when “an illocutionary statement—an indirect statement that intends to induce action in an interlocutor—results in a perlocutionary effect or consequence” (Rounsaville “Selecting” 2012). In this case, when Tiffany is asked to write a conventional print genre in a college classroom, she reacts by following the same linear processes she has always used when writing college papers. That is, she identifies the “type” of assignment she is being asked to write, and she follows the guidelines she identifies as relevant to this academic genre. These guidelines for writing conventional print genres are not founded on the rhetorical situation in which she is writing, but rather rely on Tiffany's preconceived ideas of what she classifies as “memoirs” or “research papers.”

Min, a student from Thailand who learned to speak English when she was 18, expressed similar concerns with and

descriptions of conventional print genres, stating, “In Thailand we write in a different way. Like things aren’t in order like intro and body conclusion so that’s hard for me. I worry about getting that right when I write normal papers.” Again, Min’s conception of what makes a paper “normal” echoes a generic rigidity similar to Tiffany’s conception that academic writing is written “*this* [same] way.” Rather than perceiving conventional print genres as “stabilized for now” heuristics situated in their rhetorical contexts, students in both focus groups, representing radically diverse linguistic backgrounds, describe writing these papers as a linear, limiting process (Schryer 204). To them, conventional print genres continue to be governed by stable rules that apply across different courses and contexts.

Tiffany’s repetition of “this” and “this way” in her discussion of conventional print genres, in addition to Min’s comment that conventional print genres are always written in a particular “right order,” suggests that at least these 2 students believe there is a correct way to represent their thoughts in conventional print genres. According to students like Min and Tiffany, writing academic, monomodal genres represents a challenge in fitting ideas into generic containers or templates to be approved by their instructors. The challenge is not thinking or gathering ideas (evidenced by students’ confident head tapping) but rather fitting these ideas into what students perceive to be rigid generic rules.

## On multimodality: “In a video you have...I don’t know...more flexibility”

While 12 of 17 students (both L1 and L2) expressed similar concerns when discussing their processes and experiences writing conventional print genres, there were various differences in participants’ approaches to multimodal composition. All 17 focus group participants raised their hands when asked, “Who would say they prefer making multimodal projects instead of writing print papers?” However, students’ reasoning for this decision differed, especially between L1 and L2 participants. For L1 students, multimodality seemed to be another way to repeat the words and ideas they already had in mind. Five of 7 L1 writers described their multimodal projects as a way to “emphasize” their ideas or to “repeat” the thoughts they expressed in their written paper. In contrast, 8 of 10 L2 writers described their multimodal projects as a way to “expand on” ideas that were not easily conveyed through written forms. That is, L2 writers used multimodality to layer a multiplicity of meanings rather than to reiterate a specific idea. For example, Anne, an L1 writer from Florida, explained,

I knew what I wanted to say in my project, but making a video let me repeat my idea. I thought of the words I wanted to use, and then found songs that had those *exact* words and added the songs to my video.

Anne explains making a video in her composition class to remix her conventional print literacy narrative. In her multimodal literacy narrative, she was describing “good feelings” she experienced during her composing process. Since she was thinking about the phrase “good feelings,” she explained, she found Flo Rida’s song “Good Feeling,” and added this song to the background of the PowerPoint slides she was displaying in her video. Anne’s multimodal composing process demonstrates some understanding of the affordances provided by multimodal genres, as she found a song to emphasize her ideas. However, Anne’s direct representation of the phrase “good feeling” with a song that is titled “Good Feeling” also echoes the concerns of scholars in multimodality. These scholars argue that linearly representing monomodal texts or ideas in digital form does not make adequate use of multimodal resources (Bowen and Whithaus; Lutewitte).

Rather than using various modes, such as beats in a song and images in a video, to represent different understandings of “good feelings,” Anne only claims to have used the song “Good Feeling” because she was thinking about the phrase, “good feelings.” In this way, Anne’s multimodal project still reflects a “privileging [of] words, their sequencing, and rules of usage as the primary organizing system for articulating experiences” (Bowen and Whithaus 5). Because Anne could rely on words to describe her literacy experiences as she was composing her multimodal project, her composing practices and genre conceptions remained bounded by alphabetic rules typically found in conventional print genres.

Another student, Camila, an L2 student who moved from the Dominican Republic, where she spoke only Spanish, to Florida to start college also described the affordances of multimodal composing. She explained,

Sometimes I don’t have the right words to use on my paper, but when I don’t have the right words and

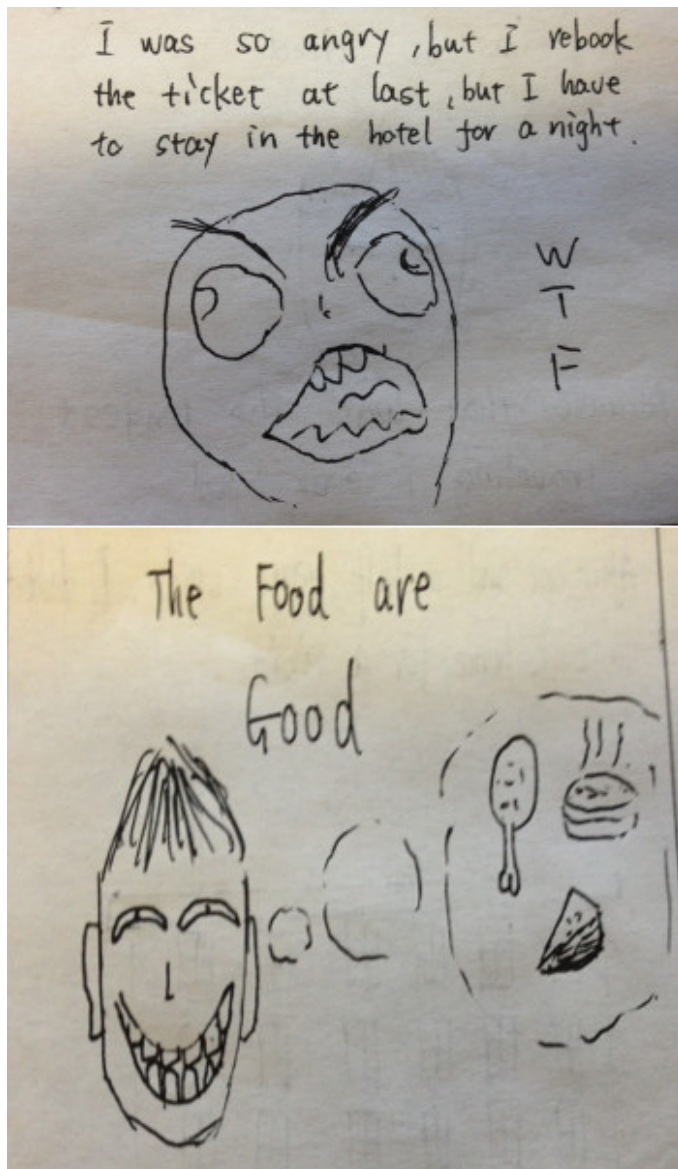
the teacher lets me make a video, I can use my video to better show my audience my idea.

Camila described a video rhetorical analysis project where she “remixed” a Coca-Cola advertisement. In this multimodal rhetorical analysis, Camila wanted to show that advertisements “usually only have one type of girl in them.” Camila wanted to show other types of girls, so she found images of girls “with different styles, different clothes, and different hair” to use in her video. She then also changed the font of the original Coca-Cola advertisement, to “show the audience what I mean by different.” She used multiple colors, diverging from Coca-Cola’s traditional red and white logo, to indicate to her audience that she was talking about difference. Lastly, Camila explains, she added a song to the background of her video, because “a song can explain something for you through beats and sounds that you don’t know how to say through words.” While Camila wanted to illustrate the impacts of only showing advertisements with “one type of girl,” by portraying “different girls” in her video, she wasn’t quite sure how to represent difference through words.

Based on her discussion, Camila seemed to be interpreting and demonstrating conceptions of “difference” in various ways, relating to style, culture, and taste, and she leveraged a variety of semiotic resources to convey these ideas. She was enacting a rhetorical genre studies approach to multimodal composing by using various modes “to represent a topic in a way that adds meaning to [rather than repeats the ideas of a] text” (Arola, Ball, and Sheppard 52). Camila was using a “guiding metaphor” of difference to rhetorically illustrate her analysis through various modes (Arola, Ball, and Sheppard 52). Instead of relying on words to describe her ideas, Camila moved on to consider how the various modes she was using could illustrate what she was thinking.

Camila explained she often doesn’t “have the right words to use” in her writing, which directly contrasts with Anne’s comment, “I *knew* what I wanted to say” in words. This example suggests students’ perceived competence speaking English might influence their approaches to multimodal composing. When students can rely on a specific set of words to convey their ideas, they seem to be almost limited by these words as they draw on other semiotic resources (e.g., pictures, songs) to compose multimodal projects. Contrastingly, when L2 students like Camila are less confident in their use of specific words, they are pushed to merge (or translanguage) across modes as they think of different ways to convey their ideas. While L1 and L2 students translanguage to some degree, students who have had to cross drastic linguistic boundaries (such as having to learn English after speaking only Spanish for many years) have more experience translanguageing (and thus layering modes to convey meaning) across a wider range of contexts.

Xen, an international L2 student who had been speaking English for less than a year when he took his composition course, explained he had an “incredibly difficult” time writing conventional print papers for his composition class. When his teacher assigned a multimodal project that asked him to “remix” a literacy narrative paper he had written earlier in the course, Xen created a comic strip that illustrated the frustration he experienced when he first started taking college courses in the US. These frustrations, he explained, started when he had a 20-hour flight delay when he was flying to the US from China. In this comic, Xen combined words with his own illustrations, portions of which are depicted in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Portions of Xen's Comic Submitted for a Literacy Narrative "Remix" Assignment.

As depicted in Figure 5, Xen's illustrations are relatively simple, not initially suggesting a deep understanding of the affordances provided by multimodal composition. During his discussion, however, Xen explained that he liked having the opportunity to create a comic to illustrate his initial experiences coming to the US because in the comic, he "didn't have to worry about making words sound a certain way." When initially writing his literacy narrative in a conventional print form (without the comic illustrations), Xen said he "could not show what he meant" because he was worried about "using words the right way." In his comic, however, Xen said he used fewer words and drew "rage faces" to further illustrate how he was feeling during his long flight to the US. "Rage faces" (further described [here \[http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics\]](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rage-comics)), reference "Rage Comics," "a series of web comics" with simple drawings "typically used to tell stories about real life experiences" (*knowyourmeme*). Using "rage faces" in his comic, Xen explained, allowed him to illustrate his frustration in a way that was "way easier" than having to describe the way he felt through written words. With the opportunity to create a multimodal project, Xen was able to draw on his repertoire of "antecedent genres" by using "rage comics" to illustrate emotions in his remixed, multimodal narrative (Freadman; Rounsaville "Selecting"). While Xen's illustrations are not elaborate, and though he still relies on conventional print texts to some degree, his adoption of multimodality prompted him to use previous genre knowledge rhetorically to convey his ideas as he repurposed his literacy narrative into a comic.

As evidenced by Camila and Xen's purposeful layering of meaning in their multimodal projects (and Nathalia's drawing in the anecdotal example presented in the introduction), L2 students (or at least the 8 of 10 students evidenced in this study) practice translingualism by "re-contextualizing" and "reforming" semiotic modes and antecedent genres (Lu and Horner 588). Though 12 of the L1 and L2 students describe experiencing some difficulty

translating their thoughts to paper, when given the option to use other semiotic modes, 8 of 10 L2 students describe using multimodality to layer (rather than to repeat) meaning using various rhetorical resources. In some ways, students like Camila who purposely layer various modes and media exhibit “rhetorical sensitivity” that pushes them to “understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways” (Shipka “Including” 78).

Through their translanguaging practices, 8 of 10 L2 writers in this study display an inherent rhetorical dexterity when developing strategies for composing multimodal projects, as they use multimodality to break from bounded, “container” models of genre often identified with conventional print texts. These different rhetorical strategies and fluid approaches to multimodal composing processes were also evident through students’ embodied gestures as they described multimodal projects and flexible genres, which will be discussed in the next section.

## **Describing Multimodal Genres Through Gestures**

While the 7 L1 writers in this study did not use any consistent gestures when discussing their multimodal projects, 7 of 10 L2 students used what I describe as fluid or wave gestures as they discussed how they bring together various resources like images and sounds to convey their ideas through multimodal writing. These 7 students were in the same group of 8 L2 students who described using multimodality to extend (rather than repeat) their ideas. The other 3 L2 students did not use any consistent gestures.

In contrast to the linear, bounded gestures used by 12 of 17 participants (both L1 and L2) when discussing their difficulties transferring thoughts to print papers, 7 of 10 L2 students’ embodied descriptions of multimodality were far less rigid. For example, Natalie, an L2 student from Paraguay, said she prefers multimodal projects to conventional print genres because, in a multimodal project, like the video she made for her literacy narrative in her composition class, “you are not limited. You have...I don’t know....more flexibility.” As Natalie said “flexibility” she moved her hands in various directions simultaneously, signaling the way she brought together various resources and ideas when putting her project together.

As Natalie spoke and moved her hands, you could see the way she was signaling the movement of various resources, including pictures, texts, beats, colors, and sounds in non-linear patterns that brought her audience through her argument. In Figure 6, we can see Natalie discussing the flexibility of multimodality through the waves she makes with her hands.



**Figure 6.** Natalie Uses Fluid, Wave Motions to Discuss Multimodality.

Similarly, Enrique, an L2 student from Brazil, made an up and down wave gesture with his hand when he described a music video he made for his composition class. In discussing his process, Enrique explained, “Making the video was hard because, you don’t just have words and pictures, but you also wanna use the beat of the music to get your ideas across.” As Enrique said “get your ideas across,” he made waves with his hand, as evidenced in Figure 7.



**Figure 7.** Enrique Makes Wave Gestures When Discussing His Multimodal Project.

As Enrique made the wave gestures when discussing the way he layered the beats of a song with the images in his video, he also moved his body up and down when saying the word “beat,” further illustrating the complex meaning-making process in which he engaged during his multimodal composing process. To Enrique, a multimodal project provided him with various choices to make--rhetorical, unbound choices that were carefully planned and articulated in his video and in his verbal and embodied discussion. Not having words to rely on, or rather to limit him, Enrique readily brought in other modes to illustrate his ideas, and he deliberately layered these modes to create his project. Like Camila’s layering of colors, images, and sounds in the project she submitted to her instructor, Enrique layered his verbal discussion of the affordances provided by multimodality with the gestural movement of his hands and shoulders.

Enrique’s discussion of multimodality echoes the definition of multimodal composing provided by proponents of RGS approaches to multimodal composition. For example, these scholars explain that multimodality includes composing through “videos, visual images, audio essays, video games, t-shirts (Odell and Katz, 2009) and even live dances” (Shipka, 2011), thus allowing for the combination of digital and embodied modes that Enrique exhibits both in the project he created and in his embodied discussion of multimodality (Arola, Ball, and Sheppard “Multimodality” n.pag.). Enrique and Natalie’s embodied discussions of multimodality can help us understand “the complex and highly rigorous decision-making process student[s] employ while producing” their multimodal projects (Shipka, “Toward,” 3). These embodied discussions further illustrate L2 students’ enactment of RGS through multimodal composition, as students using gestures in this study display a rhetorically-situated understanding of how modes can be layered to convey meaning.

While students’ verbal description of multimodality provided some insight into their approaches to multimodal composition, examining students’ gestures also allowed for an additional layer of understanding. Conventional print genres were presented as linear by 12 of 17 participants, moving directly from the mind to the paper. Multimodal projects were far less rigid, described by 7 of 10 L2 writers through waves and recursive motions moving between students’ ideas.

The flexible, unbounded gestures depicted in Figure 7 were only prevalent in 7 L2 students who appeared to have a rather complex, sophisticated understanding of multimodality. In addition, rather than perceiving their video projects as an opportunity to repeat their ideas (like Anne’s repetition of the phrase “good feeling”), 8 of 10 L2 students

verbally highlighted their ability to draw on a variety of semiotic resources to layer meaning through their multimodal projects. To L2 students, or at least the 8 L2 students represented in this study, multimodality allowed an opportunity to illustrate, through whatever means available, the ideas they felt to not “have the right words” to convey. Furthermore, having the ability to compose multimodal genres appeared to have an impact in shifting students’ tacit constructs of genres more generally. For example, before leaving the focus group, Camila explained,

I just want to say that making my video project was useful. Before, I used to think ‘oh my God, I can’t even understand myself when I write...how is a teacher every going to understand me?’ But when I made my video, I could use pictures and colors that are...you know...like a universal language. A picture can say something for you that you don’t know how to say. So now when I write my paper for my history class if I can’t think of a way to explain something I’ll use a picture if I can.

While Camila’s statement reflects an isolated instance, it’s interesting to note she connects creating a video project for her composition class with being able to draw on semiotic modes (like pictures) in other papers for her history class. By explaining that she uses pictures when she “can’t think of a way to explain something” in her history class, Camila suggests she, after making her video project in composition, focuses on delivering meaning (rather than following static generic conventions) when writing for her other courses. By tying these experiences to her video project, stating, “I just want to say that making my video project was useful,” Camila implies her experience with multimodal composition can be linked to her reconception of academic genres beyond static forms.

Camila’s observation echoes the goals of scholars using an RGS approach to teach multimodality. As Arola Ball, and Sheppard explain, “One of the goals of a rhetorical genre studies approach is to teach students to transfer processes of genre analysis, composition, and revision into any kind of writing situation” (21). While Camila’s isolated example does not provide enough evidence of the type of transfer described by Arola, Ball, and Sheppard, future studies examining translanguaging practices through multimodality and RGS could further explore the connections students like Camila may be making between multimodal composition and conceptions of genre both in and after first-year writing courses.

Focus group participants who viewed their multimodal projects as flexible seemed to understand the way genres are situated in context, once again suggesting a direct connection between multimodality, translingualism, and RGS as they are adapted into composition pedagogies. Leveraging the translingual composing strategies used by L2 students when composing multimodal projects could be useful to composition instructors and students from all linguistic backgrounds, and can significantly impact the way we combine multimodality, translingualism, and RGS in FYC.

Though it is not possible to generalize broadly from these results, based on the responses these focus group participants, a majority (8 of 10) of L2 students exhibited a nuanced understanding of multimodality that could help instructors further explore how to teach genres in less bounded ways. This nuanced understanding stemmed from L2 students’ experiences not having what they describe to be the “right words” to convey their ideas, a challenge that pushes students to use other, nonconventional print modes to make meaning. L2 students’ discussion of multimodality reflected a complex ability to layer modes and meaning in their translanguaging practices. Eight of 10 L2 students used their multimodal projects as a way to demonstrate their rhetorical awareness and flexibility when conveying their ideas. They were aware of the ideas they wanted to convey and knew they had a wider array of semiotic resources available to them, enacting the fundamental principles of rhetorical genre studies by understanding how genres are situated, mediated, and delivered in context. More importantly, L2 students were keenly aware of how to leverage and layer these semiotic resources through their work, reflecting their extensive experience translanguaging or moving purposely between languages, media, and contexts.

By presenting L2 learners as experts in multimodal composition who readily enact rhetorical genre theory, we can continue moving away from the deficit perception of L2 learning that continuously plagues the academy. Acknowledging and highlighting the inherently dexterous, flexible, and rhetorical students to leverage “the bandwidth of semiotic resources for communication in order to make available all available means of persuasion” (Selfe 2009). This leveraging of rhetorical resources, in turn, can help us build bridges between multimodality, translingualism, and RGS, in order to better account for the increasingly diverse backgrounds of students in our composition classrooms.

## Limitations

Using ELAN's tiered video coding allowed me to "examine writing in relation to other salient semiotic resources" like students' embodied gestures, perhaps resulting in a broader understanding of "what writing does" and how students engage with writing through multiple modes (Leander and Prior 231). However, I limited my analysis of gestures to descriptive narratives rather than specific coded categories primarily to avoid making drastic generalizations about the embodied practices of a culturally and linguistically diverse group of students. While there were some patterns in students' gestures clearly evident through my descriptive notes and interpretations, I did not find it fruitful to adapt a more specific and prescriptive quantitative coding scheme to gestures at this time. While some students made grandiose, elaborate gestures in their discussions, others were much more reserved, gesturing under the table located in the focus group room. I assume there are cultural underpinnings grounding these various approaches to body language, and I chose to withhold my own judgment of these practices to avoid cultural overgeneralization or essentialism.

In using focus groups for this study, I aimed to encourage dialogue between students, and to provide an environment in which students who had shared composition curricula could recall similarities or connections between their experiences. While these conversations were undoubtedly fruitful, follow-up longitudinal, situated studies should continue to elaborate on the preliminary findings presented through the focus groups. Individual interviews with students could help expand our understanding of how both L1 and L2 students arrived at their conceptions of and approaches to multimodality and RGS. Interviews and situated case-studies could be explored in future directions stemming from this project.

## Conclusion

By using student narratives to analyze how rhetorical genre studies is enacted in the classroom, I traced a distinction between L1 and L2 students' conceptions of genres in composition. For 12 of 17 L1 and L2 students, conventional print genres are perceived as templates with strict, bounded guidelines. Approaches to multimodal composition, on the other hand, appear to be influenced by students' experiences with language acquisition and negotiation, with 8 of 10 L2 students describing multimodality (7 of 10 also using gestures) as an opportunity to purposefully layer meaning across modes in less bounded ways. In this way, while both L1 and L2 students exhibited translingual practices through their combination of modes when crafting multimodal projects, 8 of 10 L2 students described using multimodality to layer meaning as an affordance they could leverage when they did not have specific words available.

L2 writers, as evidenced by my focus group data, claim to not always have "the right words" when attempting to communicate in English, leading them to readily practice translanguaging as they leverage semiotic resources. The result is a complex, purposeful approach to multimodality illustrated through the narratives of L2 writers, an approach that could help begin to question how L2 students, as experts in multimodality, can help the discipline better understand how to teach and theorize the rhetorical nature of genres.

By highlighting students' experiences with multimodality, and by moving away from the linear, container-bound approach to writing, we might continue unbinding genres from rigid forms, languages, and classrooms, seeing and teaching them as ways of meaning-making across contexts. These ways of making meaning will continue to expand as languages and technologies keep shifting and as the field of rhetorical genre studies continues to account for and partake in these changes.

Disciplinary boundaries between multimodal composition, translingualism, and RGS are beginning to shift, moving the discipline away from the single language/single mode model that does not adequately account for the lived experiences of contemporary composition students (Canagarajah; Selfe and Horner; Lu and Horner). Additionally, cross-cultural, cross-lingual, and cross-disciplinary collaborations are already situated within the history of RGS (and other areas of genre studies), as evidenced in international genre conferences and publications such as the [International Symposium on Genre Studies \[http://www.7siget.com/us/callforpapers.php?op=11\]](http://www.7siget.com/us/callforpapers.php?op=11) and the international genre collaborative hosted at [www.genreacrossborders.org](http://www.genreacrossborders.org) [http://www.genreacrossborders.org].

However, as North American Rhetorical Genre Studies continues to be adapted into contemporary composition curricula (e.g., Arola and Ball; Bowen and Whithaus), further emphasis on translingualism and multimodality can help RGS continue to reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of composition students. While some explicit links between multimodality and RGS are made in current composition pedagogy (Arola, Ball, Sheppard; Shipka,

Bowen and Whithaus), studies like the one presented in this paper can continue to provide data-driven support for the affordances of expanding students' genre conceptions across various semiotic modes and contexts. Furthermore, leveraging L2 students' broad understanding of multimodal genres as "locations within which meaning is constructed" will help us continue viewing linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a deficit in our writing classrooms (Bazerman 19).

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## Notes

1. For a continued discussion of the "single language/single modality perspective" outlined in this panel, see Selfe and Horner 2013. ([Return to text. \[#note1\\_ref\]](#))
2. In this paper, I draw a distinction between students who speak and write in English as a first language (L1 students/writers) and students who speak and write in English as a second language (L2 students/writers). While I adopt translingualism as a theoretical frame due to its fluid, emerging definition of language, I also acknowledge and account for concerns raised by a group of L2 writing instructors who recently published "Clarifying the Relationship between L2 Writing and Translingual Writing: An Open Letter to Writing Studies Editors and Organization Leaders." In this letter, L2 writing instructors "call attention to a problematic trend developing among writing studies scholars based in North America: a growing misunderstanding that L2 writing and translingual writing are somehow competing with each other or, worse yet, that one is replacing the other" (Atkinson et al., 1). Translingualism as a theoretical frame breaks "false binaries" such as "monolingual versus multilingual" by suggesting that "negotiation and change are inevitable" in all language acts (Matsuda 480). However, as Atkinson et al. further clarify, the fact that all language acts are inherently translingual does not discount the broad linguistic transitions and histories of L2 writers who had to shift from speaking and writing primarily in one language (e.g., Chinese, Spanish) to speaking and writing primarily in a second language (e.g., English). For this reason, as described by Atkinson et al., L2 or "second language" writing still stands "as a technical term that refers to any language other than the first language" adopted by an individual (2). In this paper, I use the term "L2 writer/L2 student" to reference a student who learned English as a second language, and the term "L1 writer/L1 student" to reference a student who learned English as a first language. All students in this study speak English as either a first or second language (with none of them speaking a third or fourth language). ([Return to text. \[#note2\\_ref\]](#))
3. In this paper, I use the term "conventional print" to describe what Bowen and Whithaus call "the structure of using words on a page to be read as a text" (5). Conventional print genres (as I use the concept in this paper) are genres limited to alphabetic, printed (non-digital) representation. ([Return to text. \[#note3\\_ref\]](#))
4. The Institutional Review Boards at both universities approved the study and cleared the use of video recording and transcripts for publication. Additionally, students signed informed consent forms that allowed me to publish screen captures from the recorded footage. ([Return to text. \[#note4\\_ref\]](#))
5. All students' names were changed to protect their identities. ([Return to text. \[#note5\\_ref\]](#))
6. See, for example, Rounsaville 2014, which explores the transnational literacy practices and shifting genre conceptions of a self-identified "Third Culture Kid." ([Return to text. \[#note6\\_ref\]](#))

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